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AUTHOR Blake, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that instead of getting "back to basics" (correct usage, spelling, capitalization, etc.) teachers of writing should be concerned with the fundamentals of writing well. These include an attention to the composing process; experience with producing a variety of writings (spontaneous writing, the persuasive essay, the critical essay, newspaper pieces, short fiction, and drama); a mastery of the skills of writing such as using strong verbs, using active instead of passive language, choosing precise words, eliminating wordiness, and creating effective openers; and a wide experience with the ranges of syntax. It is also suggested that teachers talk to writers to encourage writing. As they move forward to the fundamentals of writing, individuals will write better, observe life more fully, understand the nature of the composing process, show confidence in their writing, come to know themselves better, and experience the joy of creativity. (TS)

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The Basics in Teaching Writing

What's basic in teaching writing? That--and I just can't resist using the word again--is the basic question here.

In this paper, I'd like to summarize some of the interpretations of what is basic to writing and offer my own scheme of getting back to basics--or, as I prefer calling it--moving forward to fundamentals in teaching writing.

When this debate over basics in writing first started, I was initially amazed at the heat of most of the arguments. After I had read much and listened at every opportunity, my amazement turned to elation. If so many people--and persons from so many walks of life--felt they needed to argue and shout about how writing should be taught, then it seemed pretty clear to me that the issue was an important one.

This direct quote from an article in a newsweekly magazine on "Why Johnny Can't Write" exemplifies one important viewpoint: "If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any degree of structure and lucidity." From this opening sentence, the writer goes on to condemn instruction in writing in the secondary and elementary schools as well. The writer concludes "that there have to be some fixed rules, however tedious, if the codes of human communication are to remain decipherable" and implies that these rules relate to elements of writing like sentence

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fragments, misplaced modifiers, faulty agreement of subject and verb, faulty agreement of noun and pronoun, vague pronoun reference, mixed metaphor, faulty parallelism, and shift of person.

Here's evidence of how the debate goes on in my local area. A high school English department chairman tells his board of education of his frustration with trying to change the English curriculum from one which once stressed visual literacy and the study of electives to "one that stressed the basic skills--grammar, spelling, and punctuation." The Board gives the chairman support by creating nine goals for the high school English curriculum, among which are these: "The student writes logically and clearly." "The student achieves accuracy and clarity in communication by using the conventions of writing and speech." and "The student recognizes the basic structure of the English language."

More evidence. An associate professor of history at my college writes a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, the letter which is then headlined in the paper as "You Must Know Grammar To Write Good Sentences." The history professor writes, "In my capacity as a history professor, I am spending more and more of my time instructing my students, not in history, but in elementary English composition, sentence structure, and spelling."

And more. An associate professor of English at a local community college also writes a letter to the editor of the same paper, asking "How, then, does it happen that so many students are appearing on the college doorstep so woefully lacking in basic skills like reading and writing?" For this English teacher, the requisite for teaching basics is fostering pride: "Most students will eventually comply if one demands work which is professional in appearance. This is an initial step in instilling pride."

And still more. The majority of experienced secondary school English teachers in a graduate seminar conclude that students have to know grammatical terminology--noun, verb, subject, predicate, and direct object--if they are to become good writers.

Now most of these opinions appear to be prompted by reports by national agencies of the decline in language and writing skills of school age youngsters. Unfortunately, it also appears that most people read only the headlines and fail to study the fine print in the reports.

Most people who can read in our country, for instance, know that the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey, has reported that the average SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test) scores taken by high school juniors and seniors have declined in the last ten years. The scores don't reflect directly writing ability, but many people believe there is a relationship between verbal scores on the SAT and an ability to use language in writing. What seem to be the reasons for the decline in SAT scores? William H. Angoff, Executive Director of the College Board Programs for ETS in an article "Why the SAT Scores Are Going Down" (English Journal, March, 1975), gives this explanation for the fall of the scores. He is convinced that "not one reason, but very likely a complex interaction of a number of different reasons, is responsible for the score decline." Among the reasons he lists are these: students from different social classes are now taking the SAT's, able students who may have once elected to apply to prestigious colleges and take the SAT's now choose to go to community colleges or vocational schools which don't require SAT's, many colleges may have lowered their academic standards and thus encouraged students who formerly wouldn't have considered taking SAT's to take the tests and undoubtedly get lower scores, and fewer students than before take the SAT's a second time

to raise their scores. For Angoff, what many fail to realize, the SAT's--verbal and mathematics--measure abilities that grow over many years of the students' life and are dependent upon learning experiences outside of school as well as those inside the classroom. Even though the mathematical abilities are much more dependent upon "specific school-based learning," it was the verbal score that dropped most sharply. Concludes Angoff, "To attribute the score decline to a deterioration of the educational system is to neglect the other highly pervasive educational influences outside the formal educational environment and more generally to ignore the broad complexity of the human learning process and the interaction of the myriad factors that affect it."

To me, Angoff, a guy who should know what he's talking about, says we'd better get back to basics in the entire society and not only in the schools if we're going to raise those verbal skills.

Most literate people also know--again from the news media--that the National Assessment of Educational Progress recently found, as one headline announced, "Teenagers' Writing Skills Decline." But what did the National Assessment actually come up with? And what kinds of writing skills declined? In a survey of writing skills first conducted in 1970 and then repeated in 1974 with 8,000 nine, thirteen, and seventeen-year-olds, the researchers made these discoveries. First of all--and nobody says much about this--the educators found that the compositions of the nine-year-olds actually showed improvement! Rather, everybody was excited about the fact that seventeen-year-olds wrote compositions which showed these failings: use of simpler vocabulary, shorter primer-like writing style, more incoherent paragraphs, an increase in awkward sentences, run-on sentences, and a trend toward

sentence fragments. Finally--and we should note this well--the elements of writing identified consistently by most teachers and laymen as basic to writing "ordinary, expository English--punctuation, capitalization, agreement, spelling and word usage--were being handled competently by the vast majority of students.

If I read the report right, then we'd better be sure we know which "basics" we want to get back to.

An Approach To Teaching Writing--Forward to the Fundamentals

So what's the basic in teaching writing? Well, I've never believed spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and naming parts of speech were the basics in writing anyway. And neither do any of the professional writers I've read. Now after having read reports like that of the National Assessment's on writing skills, I've only had my intuitions confirmed. Rather than going back to the basics of writing--naming parts of speech, punctuating and capitalizing appropriately and spelling correctly--which aren't really basic to writing, I'd rather move forward to the fundamentals of writing.

How do I know what's fundamental in teaching writing? First, when I see a piece a kid has produced, I believe I know whether or not his teacher was concerned with the fundamentals. It seems clear from this composition, the student's writing teacher was interested in the superficial elements of writing. The result, although mechanically correct, is a sterile and lifeless paper.

The first snowflake launches the sportsman into a flurry of cleaning, waxing, and readying his equipment for the joys ahead. The long hours of preparation pass quickly as he anticipates the first heavy snow. While he works, the skier sees himself conquering Nose Dive and hot dogging the North American. Perhaps this year he will ski Aspen. The tobogganer imagines happy shouts of his friends dragging the wooden master toward the aroma of hot chocolate. The intent bobsledder checks and rechecks his equipment, knowing that carelessness could result in disaster.

Now here are two pieces which show what I think is fundamental to good writing. In the first piece, a ninth grade girl is not afraid to tell of her inability to communicate with others. And in the second piece, an eleventh grade girl writes a particularly personal letter--to accompany work she had written during the summer out of school--to an English teacher who has evidently earned the girl's affection and trust.

Express myself

I try to talk, but no-one listens.
I give my opinions, but it's not worth it.

I listen, but no-one talks.
I try to be happy--but no-one's there.
I try to live--but no-one cares.

I don't really want to insult you by explaining any of it [her writing], but I do want to say something about the piece entitled "for her." It is, as you may have well guessed, an autobiography of my fears. It took a lot to write because, in doing so, I am in a way standing mentally naked in front of you. For me it is a personal contradiction. I am trying to break ties with people and trying to rely on my own inner strengths for support. In short, become more independent and keep my personal life and feelings inside me. By showing you this piece I am opening up myself so that you can see me. In some ways that makes me feel uneasy. I know that you will be gentle with it, with me. I don't feel that in the literary sense that any of these are triumphs. But then I don't know if that is what I'm striving for in writing.

So what's fundamental in teaching writing? Because we find writing a complex mental, social, psychological, and physical act, probably one of the most complex acts humans can perform, we may despair of identifying its fundamental properties. Some point to the mechanics of writing as the basics. Others beg the question with, "All writing is self taught." I don't agree with either position. I believe we can help almost everyone learn how to write if we pay attention to these five categories.

The Composing Process

Both the teacher and the student must go through the composing process and become intimate with it. What is composing in writing? It is at once logic and rationality and mystery and magic. When we compose ⁱⁿ writing, we order what we see and think, the ordering affected by our intuition and unconscious.

On ^{the} simple level, when we compose, we gather our thoughts, write them in sentences, and then fool around with the sentences until they sound right. All writers--experienced or inexperienced--follow this general process.

Although composing in writing is an occult activity to those who haven't tried it, writers agree about its major characteristics.

Composing As Seeing Ourselves. Writers report that composing helps them to understand themselves. When we compose, we use written symbols to find out about ourselves, often in a fragmentary and unsatisfactory way, but the composing itself often helps us to see what events and people helped to make us what we are.

In this first draft composition, a young adult reveals forces that shaped his life, influences that he possibly wasn't aware of until he wrote them out.

A Childhood Experience

When I was little, I used to be sent to my grandmother's house for the summer. I hated it there. My brothers and sisters, who remained home, envied me for this visit I took annually, but I hated it. They envied the fact that I got to eat a lot of food, Italian food, while they ate only what was provided on the farm. You see, when I was young, my family lived with my mother's people, in Vermont. My mother is an Iroquois Indian and her family was poor. My grandmother, whom I visited, and who lived in Albany, was an Italian woman who I guess, would be considered middle class economically but who we thought was an extremely wealthy person.

I hated my summers with her. She would take me to stores and buy me little outfits to wear--with short pants and beany hat. She would show me off in front of her friends, make me do little tricks for them. She would make me bow, and do the alphabet, and the times table, and the capitols of the states.

She always gave me more than I could eat when she fed me and then hollered at me when I didn't finish--mentioning poor people in China who would give their lives for such a portion. What about the poor people in Winooski? She always told me that my family would be better off if my father moved us to Albany, where there was more work. She said my mother was to blame because she wanted to be near my father; I look a lot like my father when he was my age.

My grandmother gave me an allowance, 50¢, for emptying the garbage and washing off the stoop. I couldn't get dirty or she would holler at me. There was no place to play in Albany. The park was too far away to get to alone and I always got lost. Boys used to beat me up and make fun of the way I talked, because I was from Vermont. I hated summers at my grandmother's house.

Composing As an Experience of Discovery in Itself. When writers discuss composing, they report they literally don't know what they want to say until after they have written it out. Professional writers testify to this. E. M. Forster, the novelist, describes the act in this classic statement: "I don't know what I think until I see what I've said." Denise Leventov reveals how she composes a poem: "Writing a poem is a process of discovery . . . you can smell the poem before you can see it--like some animal." But well known writers aren't the only ones to describe composing as an act of discovery. A beginning writer describes her experiences with the composing process like this.

My two most favorite (and perhaps best) pieces are the two situation descriptions. The first (sick-housewife) was a real-life situation that occurred to a friend who related it to me. I thought about it for a long time before writing, but it was the most spontaneous--the words just rolled onto the paper. It was the same with the last piece--the personality profile. The situation was well thought-through before writing, and I sat down and wrote it in about thirty minutes. I did some revision of both, but I didn't want to spoil them.

In many cases, we probably "teach" too much, talk too much "about" writing. Beginning writers don't realize that all experienced writers start composing to write. Students need to become aware of this. If they plan and think too much, they may well become paralyzed before a blank piece of paper. If they understand that all writers have the same feeling when they start composing, they may have enough courage to start writing themselves.

Past Experiences with Teaching Writing Affect Composing. How were you taught writing? How were your students taught writing? Did your students learn the composing process and were they encouraged to write about their personal experiences? Or were they taught to write only expository essays and business letters and led to believe the composing process was writing down one's ideas with the teacher finding and correcting all mechanical errors in red?

See how the instruction in writing these two young women had affected their attitudes toward writing.

In college my writing (Fresh. comp.) came back covered with red (I hate red pens!) and with few positive comments. My confidence went way down. I felt I did not have the talent to write anything except term papers. I continued to keep a journal but had no desire to ever write for a course again.

I have always been a compulsive writer--of letters and journals (In junior high I even wrote a 300 page mystery a la Nancy Drew--which I threw away when my 9th grade English teacher intimidated me with the "proper" components of a story.)

Stages in Composing. If we want our students to go through the composing process, we must have firsthand knowledge of it. Unless we have gone through the composing process over and over, produced many kinds of writing, and wrestled with the problems our students face, we are in no position to help them understand what composing in writing means.

When asked to compose in a writing class, a high school English teacher told how her experiences with writing affected her idea about composing:

Writing is hard work. How many times have we heard this? We all smile and nod and never quite believe it's the agony it's made out to be. Well, I believe it now. Any teacher who understands this about writing has just got to have more sympathy for the student who encounters the paralyzing agony of facing a blank sheet of paper without confidence, without experience, and without encouragement for at least the attempt.

All writers go through certain creative rituals and insist on setting special conditions for themselves before they can start composing. Our students are ^{no} different. And they should know, as experienced writers do, that there are several stages in the composing process, stages through which they must pass before they can produce a piece of competent writing. Although experienced writers seldom label these stages, if we are going to help our students become conscious of them, we need rough labels to talk about them.

Prewriting. We may call this first stage "prewriting," "prevision," "incubation," or "gestation." The prewriting stage may cover minutes, hours, days, or even years. During this stage, we draw upon all of our experiences and relations with human beings and with other creatures as the raw material for our composing.

Planning. All writers order their ideas and feelings before they begin composing. The ordering ranges from detailed outlines to general categories carried in the head. One novelist outlined all the scenes for his novels and then fleshed out the scenes with narration and dialogue. Other writers of fiction start with a character only and let the character "write" the novel. John Updike, the short story writer, poet, and novelist, plotted scenes of one novel he was working on in church on Sunday mornings and wrote out the scenes during the week. Inexperienced writers also have different ways of planning and report different schemes for various kinds of writing.

First Draft Writing. Some teachers of writing call this the "zero" draft. Whatever the preparation--the planning and prewriting--this is the stage when the writer takes pencil or pen to paper or starts typing. It's best to say something like this to beginning writers at the first draft stage: "Now that you have thought out what you're going to write about, just go ahead and start writing. Don't worry too much about what it looks like right now. Remember, this is just a first draft and you will, of course, be revising it."

Rewriting. Because they have no experience with composing, beginning writers believe that after they have written the first draft and made some minor corrections the composing process is over. The experienced writer knows that a new kind of work, far different from the initial creative burst, remains.

Some writers see rewriting as the heart of the composing process and go so far as to maintain that all writing is rewriting. Whether that is true or not, students need to know what experienced writers do during the rewriting stage.

We can see what experienced writers do during the rewriting stage by studying their working manuscripts. In the following passage Budd Schulberg, himself a successful novelist, marvels at the diligence F. Scott Fitzgerald displayed while he revised the manuscript of The Great Gatsby.

Throughout the manuscript (and on through the galley revisions) one follows Fitzgerald's tireless quest for the mot juste as he changes shadow to silhouette, quickly to vigorously, he interrupted to he suggested, a sort of joy to a joyous exhalation, looked to glanced, My house was on the tip of West Egg to the more direct I lived at West Egg.

As the inexperienced writers come to realize all successful writers revise, they should accept revision as a necessary step in composition, not some excruciatingly painful and useless assignment created by the teacher. Better yet, the students may now assess realistically the polished pieces experienced writers create, respecting the work they have accomplished during the rewriting. No longer are they intimidated by pieces that appear to be so perfect they do not understand the process by which they were produced.

Editing. Perhaps for experienced writers, there only three general stages to composing: planning, writing, and rewriting--until one stops. For some writers, the rewriting never ends; as one writer commented on his rewriting, "I never stop rewriting. I just let the piece go."

For inexperienced writers, we should add the final stage of editing, of preparing the manuscript for print. But there are varieties of print. For our purposes, editing means bringing a manuscript to as nearly a perfect state as possible. We, and our students as well, should be satisfied with nothing less than what professional editors call "good, clean copy."

Students may edit their peices for the school newspaper, the literary magazine, or for an anthology to be printed in ditto or mineographed form

for distribution to other students in a classroom. It is essential, in fact, that students do prepare some pieces for "print," so they can see the necessity for editing.

A final word which may anticipate a question: If the composing process is so tough, so time consuming, why bother with it? Why try to persuade students to do something so obviously difficult? It's not easy to give answers to these questions for people who have never tried writing. The most we can do is to be truthful about the exhilaration one enjoys from writing.

Here is what one high school English teacher had to say about the rewards of writing.

The writing assignments were great. I didn't produce much of value but I worked hard trying to say something in a fresh, exciting way. The work was necessary to understand the process. I now have a deeper respect for those who are creative and able to express themselves.

And an elementary school art teacher found the satisfactions from writing much like those to be enjoyed from painting or drawing.

The variety and approaches to writing that were utilized proved to be a very valuable personal experience. I discovered to my delight, the satisfaction received in expressing oneself on paper. Although most of the pieces I wrote came from personal experience, I found their development in words to be a very creative process. I approached many of our writing assignments in the same way I would create an idea in art. It was enlightening to see this comparison in two different "academics." This in addition to the heightening of my self-confidence in verbal expression were the greatest benefits derived from our assignments.

The "satisfaction" and "delight" the inexperienced writer receives from her composing are not far removed from the "happiness" the professional writer Erica Jong enjoys while she writes poetry.

With the process of writing the poem, there is a kind of connection which sustains one. Then the poem is done and one is alone again. Other people may enjoy the poem later, but the poet can hardly relate to it. The poet is happy only while writing the poem.

If only one could write all the time! If only there were not all those hours of non-writing to get through!

Varieties of Writing

Experienced writers don't need outside help with finding a topic to write about, what we call "subject." They have trained themselves to observe, listen to what people say, to read, to use their other senses, and to verbalize what they experience. But inexperienced writers, especially at first, do need help with discovering topics about which they can write.

I'd like to advocate a method for inciting students to write something like this. We might have them try writing on a wide range of topics in a number of forms, such as the critical and persuasive essay, figurative language, or short fiction. Only we won't tell them they're trying a certain type of writing. We'll show them student models--which will be far less likely to intimidate them than professional models--give them a minimum of directions about the assignment, and say, in effect, "Now, why don't you try a piece something like this? See how it works out. If you don't care for this particular assignment, though, then try something you do like better." After they have completed the assignment, we can label the form of the particular piece by saying in a casual manner, "Good work. If you're interested, we call this kind of paper a persuasive essay."

So we set up a series of assignments for the students to "try." Whatever they produce will be accepted and not condemned. Since they won't be overly worried about whether we will criticize harshly what they

produce, they will gradually begin to assume responsibility for what they write. They will become more independent and more liable to defend what they create. At the same time, once our students begin to assess their own writing, they become their own severest critics. What they need more than ever at this stage--before they have gained confidence in their writing ability--is encouragement and deserved praise for the attempt, not criticism which they may see as attacks on them as persons.

As they continue with the "tries" in writing for which there is little risk, they gain confidence in their writing ability and are willing to try more and more ambitious writing, to take greater chances because they have only themselves to worry about liking their work.

What follow are examples of some of the varieties of writing young adults can produce.

Spontaneous Writing. With spontaneous writing the student is told to write whatever he wants to without thought of "correctness" or a grade for a set period of from twenty to thirty minutes. This assignment is almost always successful in getting the student started at composing.

For some reason tears flood my eyes tonight. Maybe it's the summer-like oppression on a dark, winter night. Or maybe it's a deep frustration from within. I can't fully explain my nostalgia yet; it's covered with my feelings of my late father.

Somehow he seems to be watching me everywhere I go. Tonight I experienced that same fatherly closeness, when a "father" went out of his way to help me here. Fathers know exactly how to appropriately show their feelings. My dad never seemed to care and yet, when we walked together at graduation, there was a special communion between us, something grand about us being together, like a bond we had never before reached.

I only wish that we could have openly shared as much as we cared for a little while longer.

Gripe or Gratitude (Persuasive Essay). ^{In} ~~For~~ the persuasive essay, the writer attempts to persuade an individual to do something for him. This assignment forces the student to focus his writing on a particular audience, and he writes easily on a topic he feels deeply about. In this excerpt from a letter, a student wants to persuade the telephone company to install her telephone.

I am deeply concerned with the attitude your company has shown to college students. Recently I applied for a telephone to be installed in my apartment. I was questioned whether I was a student, to which I replied, "Yes." I had my credit checked, gave references of previous employers, and answered various other questions. I was then informed that it would be necessary for me to appear at the Rochester office for an interview and pay a twenty-five dollar deposit. I explained that since I live in Brockport and had no transportation, it would be difficult for me to appear in person. I was offered no alternative other than not having my phone installed.

Reaction to Something Read or Seen (Critical Essay). All persons have opinions about movies, TV programs, or books they have read and will react willingly as long as they are not overly concerned with the "proper" elements of the critical essay. Here's a student's reaction to a TV program.

Having enjoyed the movie a few years ago, I was intrigued when M*A*S*H was made into a TV series. Could a half-hour version measure up to the witty and sarcastic yet tragically satirical movie?

The first episode I saw was disappointing. The characters weren't as vibrant, as dynamic as Elliott Gould and Donald Sutherland had made them. Hot Lips was all wrong. She was too plain, too simpy-- definitely not a Sally Kellerman. The lines weren't nearly funny enough and I caught a few anachronistic speeches, using current slang obviously not in use during the Korean War, when M*A*S*H is supposed to take place. Comparing the TV series to the movie I concluded, after one episode, that the half-hour compact version was not successful.

A Newspaper Story. Students may try different types of newspaper writing like the editorial, letter to the editor, sports story, human interest story, or feature story. From such assignments, the students

become aware of the varieties of prose in daily newspapers and decide, on the basis of firsthand experience, which kinds they like or do not like to write. Here is an example of a student's attempt at the standard newspaper "inverted pyramid" story of an actual incident.

Motorists Avoid Head On Collision

At 11:30 a.m. today, two cars veered off Route 31 at a road construction site in Spencerport. The drivers of the cars, Mrs. K. D. Rex of 134 Victor Lane, Hamlin, and R. A. LaRose of 1414 Canal Road, Spencerport, each turned to the right to avoid a head on collision, police reported. Mrs. Rex hit the side of a road grader. Mr. LaRose struck a telephone pole.

According to witnesses, flagmen at each end of the construction motioned the cars to proceed down the single lane at the same time.

Mr. LaRose and Mrs. Rex were treated for superficial cuts and were released from Genesee Hospital. The LaRose vehicle was totally destroyed. The Rex car sustained extensive damage to the front end.

Figurative Language. It is a mistake to separate "exposition" from "creative" writing. Figurative language pervades all successful writing, whatever we label it. When the students observe and become sensitive to figurative language, they are learning skills of writing which will serve them in all future composing. Here are examples of figurative language produced by students.

Similes:

The expressway is like a tangled mass of hair.

His unshaven face felt like a Brillo pad.

A mustache is like crabgrass.

Metaphors:

A rainbow is a box of crayola crayons.

Dad is a grizzly bear in the morning.

The setting sun is a red balloon.

Sense Recordings:

Sight:

On the crowded playground
A little brown head
Bobs up and down,
A lone peacock among the geese.

Smell:

They crowd around my desk,
Sweaty, hot and tired.
Their scent hangs heavy.
The air is full of
Adolescence here.

Touch:

Her little brown body
Has long lean legs
Which she wraps around me
Tightly.

Haiku:

Barren and bare
Stands the gnarled old tree.
I dream alone.

Character Description (Short Fiction). As the students describe in writing people they know intimately, they are acquiring skills of writing fiction. When they add conflict and dialogue to character description, they usually write, mostly unaware of the proper "form" of fiction, a short story. The skills of using narration and dialogue to show character relationships, like the use of figurative language, can be used with most kinds of writing. In this piece, the writer describes a young child taking out a book from a librarian, all told--in an expert way--from the point of view of the child.

I was very nervous as I stood in front of the grey metal desk. I could just see the top of the desk. It was white and wood looking. There was a lady sitting at the desk. She was old. I smiled at her but she couldn't see my mouth. It was hidden by the desk. She just looked at me.

"May I help you?" The voice sounded very loud. It scared me. I just shook my head. "Do you want to check out this book?" I wanted to say that. I nodded. "Do you have your library card?" I held up this piece of crumpled cardboard with my name on it. "Would you like to watch me check out your book?" I really wanted to do that. I grinned at her. She got out of her chair and called to me to sit in it. I crawled into it.

I could see the top of the desk better now. I felt it. It wasn't wood. I pounded on the top to try and figure out what it was. I could see that the top was plastic like my toy truck. My toy truck was blue and the top was white. Have to ask my dad about that.

The lady took a stamp and hit my book. She wrote something in my book, closed it and gave it to me. I climbed down to the floor. I hoped that she didn't hurt my book.

"You'll have to bring the book back in two weeks," she said. Rats, I thought. I wanted to keep it forever. I frowned and left the library.

Skills of Writing

Some teachers of writing believe students learn the skills of writing as they write. So the argument goes, as they write, they teach themselves to correct mechanical errors. Other writing teachers maintain students must practice writing skills in exercises and that when they write complete compositions, they will transfer those skills learned from exercises to writing error-free compositions.

The answer to how beginning writers acquire command of the skills of writing, I believe, lies somewhere between these two positions. Experienced writers, as usual, don't need anyone to tell them to revise sentences or to correct mechanical errors; they have learned to do so by much practice and constant attention to the writing process. The inexperienced writer,

though, needs to become aware of certain categories of writing skills, especially in the rewriting and editing stages. But he must also be aware of the relative importance of a command of the mechanical skills of writing; it is a necessary part of the writing process but should never be mistaken for the process itself.

Here are some of the types of writing skills which beginning writers might need to practice in exercises.

Passive and Active Verbs.

Directions: Rewrite the following sentence so the passive verb is active.

Original: On Sundays, the table is surrounded by everyone, and a pleasant meal is enjoyed by all.

Revised: On Sundays, everyone sits at the table and enjoys a pleasant meal.

Openers.

Directions: Rewrite the following beginning sentences from a student composition. You may add words or clauses to do this.

Original: It was Wednesday night.

Revised: It was Wednesday night, and I was being followed down the street by a hunchbacked midget.

Overuse of Adjectives and Adverbs.

Directions: Revise the following sentence, cutting out adjectives and adverbs to improve the sentence.

Original: I blankly stared out into the distant sea.

Revised: I stared out into the sea.

Vivid Sensory Appeal.

Directions: Revise the following sentences so that it represents a more vivid appeal to the senses.

Original: The door closed with only a slight noise.

Revised: The door clicked shut.

Better Sentences (Syntactic Fluency)

Although the ability to create a variety of well formed sentences may appear to be one of the skills of writing, we might better consider it in a separate category.

We might ask, "Why separate exercises on creating varied sentences?" Don't students learn how to write longer and more complex sentences by just writing? "Yes, they do. Research shows that with traditional instruction in writing twelfth grade students do write longer and more complex sentences than do fourth grade students. But research also shows that with special language instruction in what we call sentence combining, students may advance in their ability to write longer and more complex sentences twice as fast as they normally would, showing two years of growth in sentence complexity in one year.

What do we mean by sentence combining? It is a term used to describe a process of combining short, basic sentences into longer, more complex ones. Sentence combining problems reflect complex rules for producing sentences which transformational grammarians have developed over the last several decades. But what makes problems in sentence combining useful in the classroom is the fact that anyone can learn how to combine a wide variety of complex sentences without knowing any of the complicated terminology of transformational grammar.

In this sentence combining problem, one basic sentence is embedded within another as a relative clause.

Base	People should live with other garlic eaters.
Sentences:	People eat garlic. (Who)
Result:	People who eat garlic should live with other garlic eaters.

Students learn very quickly how to do this exercise and others like it.

And they report they enjoy doing such language "puzzles," especially if they see the problems as games and have no trouble in working out the solutions.

Here are some further examples of sentence combining problems.

The boar rushed through the thicket.
The boar was blue.

The blue boar rushed through the thicket.

I love food.
The food was prepared by a French chef. (-ed)

I love food prepared by a French chef.

He enjoyed best the hundred yard dash.
The dash had a photo finish. (Which)

He enjoyed best the hundred yard dash, which had a photo finish.

The boy won the race.
The boy was poor.
The boy had no father. (Who)
The race was 500 meter.
The race was speed skating.

The poor boy who had no father won the 500 meter speed skating race.

We must make two reservations about sentence combining problems. First, syntactic fluency is not all there is to writing well. No writing instruction program can be built on sentence combining problems alone. Secondly, syntactic fluency should not be equated with writing style. Yes, experienced

writers write longer and more complex sentences than do inexperienced authors. But experienced writers also show rhythm with their sentences, balancing short and long sentences, and students should learn how to use a variety of sentences in their writing.

Talking about Writing

What you say or write to students about their writing is crucial to how they approach writing, whether or not, in fact, they will go on composing in writing when they are no longer compelled to. What we say about their writing and how we say it is the basis of our relationships with our students as we all approach writing.

I have found the best way to talk to my students about their writing is based upon an assumption which goes something like this: "I know writing is hard, but once you learn how to write, it can be one of the most satisfying and exciting things a human being can do. Let me help you become an able writer. I will do my best to show you ways to improve your writing. I will teach you what I have learned about writing from study and extensive writing myself. But don't always count on me to tell you what or what not to do while you write. You must learn to make your own decisions about your writing. That's the only way you'll ever become a competent and maybe even an outstanding writer."

Here are some general guidelines which I have found useful to consider when talking to inexperienced writers.

Especially at the beginning, all of our comments are aimed at helping the inexperienced writers gain confidence in themselves as persons and as writers.

We must praise a great deal. We find at least one interesting word, phrase, or idea to note. Since the initial pieces are mostly "free association" and first draft writing which the student has produced simply to get something down on paper, they don't deserve extended comments anyway. For such initial, ego-boosting pieces, we might say or write comments like these.

Good start. Good observation. You might want to go on with this description.

You feel deeply, Susan, and have the ability to share your feelings with us. You may wish to describe this more fully.

You generate a lot of excitement here with your honest responses. Good work.

Good start. You're clever with words. Maybe too clever? You might want to try this again with simpler words.

We don't need to make extensive comments on all aspects of the student's writing.

Remember that our comments are intended chiefly to help the student learn how to rewrite his compositions himself, not to provide detailed corrections. We want to place the burden--and excitement--of revision and proofreading on his shoulders, not keep them on ours.

We want to keep our comments in perspective. We note important things in our students' writing like honest reactions, fresh observations, sustained point of view, precise use of words, good openers, expert use of dialogue, or the generation of excitement.

But, of course, we don't react to all of these at once. We comment, of course, about lesser matters as well but convey the impression that we know they are of secondary importance. In this category of less important elements, I would include such matters as handwriting, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and formal standard usage. Here are some of the things we might say.

You have really looked at the young tree in the courtyard and described it well. Now can you think of fresh, new ways to talk about it?

What a beautiful piece of writing! You wrote everything from the little boy's eyes and never missed a beat. You might want to go on with this piece. You have made me want to know what happens next.

Fine opening! You create an immediate tension. I want to read on.

I get the impression that you really didn't know how to end this piece. Endings are always hard. You may want to try working this one over.

You really should check the spelling of all words that you are unsure of next time. The misspelled words detract from an otherwise fine piece.

By the way, your handwriting is hard to read. Try to write larger, and don't cramp your letters together.

You seem unsure of how to use commas. Check with your handbook. There are only a few basic punctuation conventions. You should know them.

The next time double space and give yourself wide margins. This is hard to read, and it's hard for you to revise.

We should help our students see writing as the art of making choices.

If I were to arrive at one phrase summing up writing, I would say, "making choices." As teachers, we move from suggesting rather simple and straightforward choices to recommending complex, overall choices that students might consider. But, as we offer alternatives, we never forget that our recommendations are only that, recommendations they may consider but may accept or reject on the basis of whether the substitutes seem right for them.

Here are some types of comments which may prod our students into making choices in their writing.

Why not add specific characters to this and have them debate the issues? It might add vitality. Think about it.

Have you noticed that you've used many formal words? I've underlined some. Why not substitute less formal ones? Do they sound better?

In the second paragraph you really get warmed up. You might cut out the first paragraph and find out how the second paragraph sounds as an opener.

Many of your sentences are long and involved. Why not try to break them up into simpler ones? How do they look and sound now?

What you have written is more poetry than prose. It's filled with images of specific plants and animals. The similes and metaphors are striking. Why not redo as a poem? Compress. Sharpen the images. Make sure the metaphors work. Don't try for regular verse, but break your lines where they seem natural for you. What you've written has so much promise, it's worth a try.

We should help our students find their voices.

As our students find out what they know best and feel most deeply about, they will be discovering their writing "voices." If we assist them with writing honestly, we shall find that virtually all the other problems encountered in writing will take care of themselves.

Here are some comments aimed at helping inexperienced writers discover their individual voices.

You love your grandfather very much, and your feelings come through. You might want to go on with this if for no other reason than to put down your memories on paper.

You really feel strongly about this issue, don't you! And you know what you're talking about, too. You might go on with this topic. Your special knowledge makes the subject fascinating.

I had never thought of fishing being so beautiful. You may like to work some more on this piece. You certainly describe the whole business with authority and flair.

Your voice comes through in this piece! And it's a strong, clear voice. Good work. Don't be afraid to show us who you are, what you stand for in your writing.

What Happens When you Move Forward to Fundamentals
in Teaching Writing

So what can we expect if we help our students write? If we support and encourage them? If we help them find that writing is a process, an act that can be broken down into its component parts and learned? If we talk to them about their writing so they see us as honest and trusting readers? If we train them to see their writing as the art of making choices with language? If we help them to discover through language what they are and what they might become?

Several things are likely to happen. I can almost guarantee it in every case.

Our students will be able to write competently. Because they are writing about topics close to them, they will care more about their writing. They will write complete sentences; employ correct usage; spell, capitalize, and punctuate effectively; write legibly; and use acceptable conventions of format. Or they will themselves correct errors in these matters. And, interestingly enough, they will have no more trouble than the average adult with filling out job applications, driver license applications, or assorted questionnaires.

Our students will begin to observe life more fully. They will begin to see the world as the trained writer does. They will filter experiences through their senses and then analyze what they see, smell, touch, hear, and taste. They will work out structures from masses of seemingly unrelated details. They will bring some personal order to the chaos that surrounds them.

Our students will have a realistic idea of what the writing process is. Since they are now familiar with the frustration, loneliness, and pure drudgery of writing well, they will no longer fear the act. Also they will have a better understanding of what admired writers go through before they finish an essay, poem, short story, or play.

Our students will show confidence in their ability to write when they need to. Few of them will continue writing away from a situation where someone requests them to produce. But, since they have now written a variety of pieces, they are no longer paralyzed by the admonition, "Write a composition!"

Our students will know themselves better. They have learned--as have other writers before them--that they actually didn't know what they wanted to say until they had written it out. And they have discovered that one of the surest paths to self discovery is through words, especially through written words.

And finally our students will experience the joy of creativity. If we mean by creativity the ability to use words in a novel way to instruct or move other human beings, then all of us can create in words. It's a marvel to behold student after student, in his own unique way, construct sentences that are original, sometimes elegant, and frequently breathtaking.

In these selections, young adults report a personal satisfaction from putting their thoughts down on paper, a realization that when they write, they are being original.

Already having had a deep appreciation for the difficulties being faced by children who are trying to write, I am now encouraged to know that anyone can improve and actually enjoy the emotional release writing provides. PHEW!!!

I hope to continue to write more on my own now. I do not desire to become a professional or anything--I just want to get personal satisfaction out of it.

This course [teaching writing] has been the first in nine years where I have not had to depend upon some researched affair in executing assignments. I've reached the conclusion that often our trust in another's written word is a rationalized crutch necessary to disguise our own insecurities and promote a lifetime reliance on someone else's thoughts rather than on developing our own. How frequently have we been struck with the realization that our "original thoughts" are merely regurgitated reminiscences of "required readings" of overlooked yesterdays?

I regret that I have not done more writing in the past, for although I wrote laboriously, I discovered a sense of satisfaction in collecting my thoughts. Probably I will never write anything with publication in mind, but it does help clarify thinking, to put it down on paper. I've come to the conclusion that writing can serve as therapy--even if the author is the only one to read it!